

Variable Use of Spanish Subject Pronouns by Monolingual Children in Mexico

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1. Introduction

In all varieties of adult Spanish, speakers can include an overt subject personal pronoun (SPP) or omit it, as in the example in (1) below.¹ English pronouns in parentheses correspond to Spanish null subject pronouns (represented by Ø). Relevant pronouns are underlined.

- (1) ...él siguió caminando. Y Ø ve que se acercaban las personas. Y entonces él fue -- Ø camina más rápido como para huir de ellos. Y Ø notó que Ø lo estaban siguiendo...

‘...he kept on walking. And (he) sees that the people were getting closer. And then he went – (he) walks faster as if to flee from them. And (he) noticed that (they) were following him.’

In the second tensed verb in (1), the speaker could have said *y él ve* (and he sees), including the overt subject pronoun *él* (he), instead of omitting it. The speaker could also have omitted the overt subject pronoun *él* that appears with the third tensed verb and said *Y entonces fue* instead of *Y entonces él fue*. In fact, in this example all underlined null SPPs could have been expressed as overt pronouns and all overt SPPs could have been omitted. While there are some contexts in which either an overt SPP or a null SPP is obligatory,² in most contexts the use of SPPs is variable, i.e. the SPP can be expressed or omitted.

The alternation between overt and null SPPs has become one of the most widely researched variables in Variationist studies of adult Spanish (Abreu 2009; Ávila-Jiménez 1995; Bentivoglio 1987; Cameron 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995; Cameron & Flores-Ferrán 2004; Carvalho & Child 2011; Flores-Ferrán 2002, 2004; Holmquist 2008; Hurtado 2001, 2005; Lapidus & Otheguy 2005; Morales 1997; Orozco & Guy 2008; Otheguy & Zentella 2012; Otheguy, Zentella & Livert 2007, 2010; Ranson 1991; Shin & Otheguy 2009; Silva-Corvalán 1982, 1994; Torres-Cacoullós & Travis 2010; Travis 2007). Overt and null SPPs have also been investigated in Variationist studies of second language acquisition of Spanish (Abreu 2009, Geeslin & Gudmestad 2008, Gudmestad & Geeslin 2010), but variable SPP use in the speech of monolingual Spanish-speaking children has not been thoroughly investigated. The purpose of the current paper is to begin to address this gap in the literature.

Intuitively one would expect that the more variable a feature, the longer it will take to acquire because the input does not offer consistent examples of usage. But Variationist studies of child

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¹ This example comes from a narrative that was produced by a monolingual teenager in Mexico as part of a larger project conducted by the author.

² For an in-depth discussion of variable versus obligatory contexts, see Otheguy et al. (2007:775-778).

language thus far have indicated that children develop control over the use of variable features very early (e.g. Cameron 2010; Díaz-Campos 2005, 2011; Roberts 2004). For example, Díaz-Campos (2005) found that, like adults, monolingual Spanish-speaking children, ages 4;5 to 5;9, retain intervocalic /d/ more often in formal styles than in informal styles. Roberts (1997) found that most of the phonological and morphological constraints on variable (-t,d) deletion in English were evident in the speech of three- and four-year-old children. Still, much of the Variationist research on child language has investigated phonological (Cameron 2010, Díaz-Campos 2005, Foulkes & Docherty 2006, Foulkes et al. 1999, Roberts & Labov 1995, Romaine 1978) and morphophonological (Guy & Boyd 1990, Labov 1989, Roberts 1997) phenomena. There have been fewer studies of variable syntactic phenomena in child language (but see Kovac & Adamson 1981). Thus, research on the variable use of SPPs among Spanish-speaking children will further our understanding of how variable features of syntax develop during first language acquisition.

Research on the variable use of SPPs in first language acquisition of Spanish can also increase our understanding of how the influence of social factors on language use can wax and wane during a person's lifespan. For example, Cameron (2011) has argued that gender differences emerge and increase in strength during elementary school, peak in adolescence, and then dissipate during adulthood. There is evidence that speaker gender significantly affects SPP use among eight- to twelve-year-old children (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997), but studies of adults have not typically found significant differences between men and women with respect to SPP use (e.g. Ávila-Jiménez 1995:36, Flores-Ferrán 2002:91, Holmquist 2008:31, Orozco & Guy 2008:78, Silva-Corvalán 2001:155).³ Therefore, studying younger children's SPP use can add to our understanding of the developmental patterning of divergent and convergent usage among males and females.

To date there have been very few studies of Spanish-speaking children's SPP use. Most studies of subject expression in early stages of child Spanish have focused on the alternation between overt (lexical and pronominal combined) and null subjects in the speech of children whose ages range from approximately one and a half to three years old (Austin et al. 1997, 1998; Bel 2003; Grinstead 2004; Paradis & Navarro 2003; Silva-Corvalán & Sánchez-Walker 2007). During this age range, children omit many subjects. The subjects they do express tend to be lexical NPs and demonstratives. Studies of child Spanish, Italian and Portuguese show that the use of overt SPPs increases between ages one and a half and three years (Bel 2003, Serratrice 2005, Valian & Eisenberg 1996), but are mostly restricted to the first person singular. Some overt second person singular pronouns are produced as well, but overt third person personal pronouns are rare or nonexistent at this age (Bel 2003:16-17; Serratrice 2005:454).⁴ The scarcity of overt SPPs in very young children's speech makes it difficult to examine when children's alternation between overt and null subject pronouns comes to mirror that of adults. There is some indication that it takes a long time for children's rates of overt SPP use to reach adult levels. As part of a study of Dominican Spanish in contact with Haitian Creole, Ortiz López (2011) analyzed SPP use in the speech of five monolingual Spanish-speaking adults and seven monolingual Spanish-speaking children, ages four to 12 years old. Comparisons of these Dominican adults and children showed that, on average, the children produced fewer overt pronouns than adults did (Ortiz López 2011:432-437).⁵

Variationist studies of school-age children have thus far indicated that bilingual Spanish/English-speaking children alternate between overt and null SPPs in ways that are similar to adults by age

³ Recently, Otheguy & Zentella (2012) found that in New York City Mainlander (Colombian, Ecuadorian and Mexican) women use more overt pronouns than Mainlander men do. The authors interpret their findings as evidence that these women lead the ongoing change in NYC, i.e. the increasing rates of overt SPPs among Latinos.

⁴ Children between one and three years old learning Catalan, Italian, or Spanish produce overt third person pronouns, but these are mostly demonstratives, not personal pronouns (Austin et al. 1998:39, Bel 2003:16-17, Paradis & Navarro 2003:380, Serratrice 2005:451-455).

⁵ In Ortiz López's (2011: 437-438) study, none of the children's overt pronoun rates reached adult levels, with one odd exception: the four-year-old monolingual children produced a very high rate of overt pronouns (81%). The five- and six-year-olds produced a comparatively lower rate (26%), and the older children in the study continued to produce lower rates of overt pronouns. This surprising and unusual pattern warrants further attention.

twelve. Bayley & Pease-Álvarez (1996, 1997) studied Spanish narratives produced by eight- to twelve-year-old bilingual children of Mexican descent in California. The authors found that the bilingual children's SPP use was constrained by grammatical variables that have also been found to constrain adult usage, such as person and number of the verb and switch-reference. Experimental studies of Spanish-speaking (Shin & Cairns 2009, 2012) and Italian-speaking (Sorace et al. 2009) children have indicated that under the age of eight, children differ from adults in their sensitivity to switch-reference as a predictor of overt and null SPP preference patterns. In sum, the few studies done so far on child Spanish suggest that, over age eight, children use SPPs in ways that are similar to adult usage, and under age eight children differ from adults with respect to the influence of switch-reference on SPP use.

2. The Current Study

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Mexico children

To investigate children's variable use of SPPs in Spanish, narratives were collected from Spanish-speaking children, who were recruited from private elementary schools in two interior cities in Mexico.⁶ All participants were monolingual speakers of Spanish as confirmed by interview questions, as well as by the teachers and administrators of the schools. Data from 13 children (6 boys, 7 girls), whose ages ranged from 6;4 – 7;8 (mean age = 6;9), were included in the present study. For purposes of clarity, these children will be referred to as 'Mexico children.'

2.1.2. Comparison group: California children

The children's use of overt and null SPPs was compared to previous studies of SPP use by bilingual Spanish-English speaking children, ages eight to twelve, in California (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997).⁷ This comparison group will be referred to as 'California children.' It is important to note that the Mexico and California children not only differ according to location and bilingualism (the Mexico children being monolingual and the California children bilingual), but also to age (the Mexico children were under age eight and the California children over age eight).

2.1.3. Comparison groups: Adults

In an attempt to compare children to adults, data were also drawn from studies of adult SPP usage in various cities. To the best of my knowledge, there is no study of Mexicans in Mexico that reports rates of SPP expression for all grammatical persons (but see Quesada & Blackwell 2009, Blackwell & Quesada 2010 for studies of subject expression among adult speakers in Mexico).⁸ Therefore, two groups of adult Mexicans in the United States were included as comparison groups: adult Mexicans in Los Angeles (Silva-Corvalán 1994),⁹ and adult Mexicans in New York City (*Otheguy-Zentella Corpus*

⁶ Two of the children were from Querétaro; 11 were from Oaxaca.

⁷ The Dominican children studied by Ortiz López (2011) were not included as a comparison group, primarily because Mexican and Dominican Spanish are known to be quite different with respect to SPP use. Mexican Spanish is typically characterized as having low rates of overt SPPs, whereas Dominican Spanish typically has higher rates than other varieties (Otheguy & Zentella 2012, Toribio 2000).

⁸ Quesada & Blackwell (2009:128) studied 289 first person singular contexts among native speakers in Querétaro, Mexico, and found that they expressed subject pronoun *yo* in these contexts at a rate of 35 percent. Blackwell & Quesada (2010) studied third person contexts among the same native speakers in Querétaro and found that they expressed 8 subject pronouns and 61 null subject pronouns (i.e. 11.6 percent overt). Singular and plural subject pronouns were included in the rates reported for third person contexts. Since singulars tend to be expressed overtly at higher rates than plurals, the figure for overt *él* and *ella* is likely to be higher than 11.6 percent.

⁹ The adult Mexicans in Los Angeles are Silva-Corvalán's (1994:15,153) 'Group 1' speakers, who immigrated to the US after age 11.

of *Spanish in New York*¹⁰). Interviews with Mexicans in NYC were selected according to Otheguy et al.'s (2007, 2010) category of speakers called 'Newcomers,' i.e. speakers who arrived in New York at age 17 or older and had spent no more than five years in New York at the time of the interview. We cannot be entirely sure that the SPP use among NYC Mexican newcomers mirrors SPP use among Mexicans still living in Mexico. Nevertheless, the *Otheguy-Zentella* newcomers have had limited exposure to English, and many report that they are monolingual. Therefore, in the absence of data from monolingual Mexicans in Mexico, I use rates for NYC adult Mexicans as an approximation for usage among adults in Mexico. In addition to the two groups of Mexican adults in the US, studies of adults in Madrid were included (Cameron 1992, Enríquez 1984). As in Mexico, Madrid has low rates of subject expression, especially as compared to the Caribbean (e.g. see Cameron 1992, 1994).

2.2. Data elicitation and coding

Oral interviews were conducted with each child individually, in a quiet room in the school. Since conversation style and topic have been shown to influence rates of SPP use (Flores-Ferrán 2002, Travis 2007), data were elicited in three different ways. First, participants were asked to narrate Mercer Mayer's picture book, *A Boy, a dog and a frog*, in a no-shared knowledge context, i.e. only the participant, not the researcher, was looking at the book. The researcher explicitly told the children that she could not see the book, had not looked at it carefully, and was going to close her eyes or turn away to imagine everything in the story. After narrating the picture book, each child was asked to tell another story from memory. Some children made up their own stories; others narrated famous fairy tales. Finally, a sociolinguistic interview was conducted, prompting the children to talk about themselves, their friends and families, and important memories.

The study focused on contexts where either an overt or a null SPP could have occurred. So, all tensed verbs that occurred with overt SPPs where a null subject would also have been possible, as in the underlined example in (2), and all tensed verbs that occurred with a null subject where an overt pronoun or an overt lexical NP would have been possible, as in the underlined examples in (3), were extracted from the interviews for analysis.

- (2) Mi mamá vende en ese color, y luego ella vende en... (106)
'My mother sells in that color, and later she sells in...'
- (3) Luego, el niño llevó a la rana en un barril y..y.. iba a agarrar más ranas. Buscó y buscó... (102)
'Later, the boy carried the frog in a bucket and... and... (he) was going to catch more frogs. (He) searched and (he) searched...'

Tensed verbs with lexical NP subjects (*la mesa está en el salón*) were not included in the current study, since the focus was on the alternation between overt and null subject pronouns. Also, following Otheguy et al. (2007:775), excluded from the study were contexts where variation of the kind described above is rare or nonexistent. So, contexts where overt pronouns rarely or never occur were excluded, e.g. instances of the verb *haber*, verbs that occur with impersonal *se*, subject-headed relative clauses (*El niño que está en el bosque*), and verbs that appear with a null subject that makes reference to meteorological conditions (*nieva mucho aquí*). Contexts where overt SPPs occur and cannot be omitted, such as pseudo-cleft constructions (*La culpable es ella*), would also have been excluded had they occurred in the speech of the children. In sum, the study focuses on contexts where speakers can either express or omit a SPP, as in (2) and (3) above.

Included in the analyses was one internal independent variable, grammatical person/number, and three external independent variables, speech context, age and gender. The first variable, person/number, has emerged as the most powerful grammatical predictor of SPP use in many studies

¹⁰ The Otheguy-Zentella corpus consists of 140 sociolinguistic interviews conducted in Spanish in NYC. The corpus was developed by Ricardo Otheguy and Ana Celia Zentella at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York with support from University and Professional Staff Congress grants, as well as from a grant from the National Science Foundation (0004133).

of adult Spanish (e.g. Otheguy et al. 2007, Otheguy & Zentella 2012), as well as in the two studies of California children (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997). Different from the aforementioned studies, the person/number variable in the current study was categorized according to the pronouns, not the verb. So, for example, the 3sg category for the current study included *él/ella*, but not *usted*, and the 3pl category included *ellos/ellas*, but not *ustedes*. The second variable, speech context, was studied by dividing three types of speech to see if they triggered different rates of pronoun use: a) narratives based on a picture book, b) made-up stories/retelling of fairy tales, and c) responses to question posed as part of a sociolinguistic interview. Speaker age was investigated to determine if a developmental trend was detectable between the ages of 6;4 and 7;8. Finally, since previous studies have shown significant influences of speaker gender on variable SPP use (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997) and other variable linguistic structures in children's speech (e.g. Roberts 1997, Cameron 2010, among others), possible differences between the girls and boys were also explored.

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Overall rates of SPP expression

The rates of overt SPP expression by the Mexico and California children, as well as adults in NYC, Los Angeles, and Madrid, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Rates of overt subject personal pronoun expression among children and adults

	N Verbs	Percent overt SPPs
Mexico Children (this study)	1,150	6.3
California Children (oral data only)	3,170	20.0
California Children (oral & written data)	1,549	24.0
Adults – NYC Mexicans	2,569	18.7
Adults – Los Angeles Mexicans	360	32.8
Adults – Madrid	23,717	21.0

Sources: Bilingual children over-eight (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997), Mexican newcomers in NYC (Otheguy-Zentella Corpus), Mexicans in Los Angeles (Silva-Corvalán 1994:153, 'Group 1'), Madrid (Enríquez 1984, reported in Silva-Corvalán 2001:158).¹¹

As shown in Table 1, the initial results are striking: the Mexico children in this study used overt SPPs at a much lower rate than the rates reported for the California children and for the four adult groups.

2.3.2. Rates of SPP expression by grammatical person/number

SPP expression was examined for each grammatical person. For the Mexico children and the adult Mexicans in NYC, only the following grammatical person/number categories were included: first person singular (1sg) *yo*, second person singular (2sg) *tú*, third person singular (3sg) *él/ella*, first person plural (1pl) *nosotros/nosotras*, third person plural (3pl) *ellos/ellas*. In other words, *usted*, *ustedes*, and nonspecific *uno/unos* were excluded from the analyses for grammatical person/number.¹² Table 2 presents the rates of expression for the remaining 1,134 verbs for the children and the remaining 2,544 verbs for the Mexican adults in NYC. In addition, rates are reported for the California children, as well as for adults in Madrid (Cameron 1992:233, Enríquez 1984).

¹¹ Note that Cameron (1992:234) reports similar overall rates for subject expression among speakers in Madrid.

¹² From the original 1,150 verbs produced by the Mexico children, the following 16 cases were excluded: 8 *usted*, 4 nonspecific *uno*, 2 *ustedes*, and 2 cases for which grammatical person/number was unidentifiable due to reference ambiguity. Of these excluded cases there was only one expressed subject pronoun (*usted*). The rest (15) were null pronouns.

Table 2. Rates of overt SPP expression by person and number among children and adults

	1sg	2sg	3sg	1pl	3pl
Mexico children (this study)	16.8	5.7	3.1	4.4	6.1
California children (oral data only)	36.0	--	^a 20.0	9.0	11.0
California children (oral & written data)	37.0	--	^b 25.0	9.0	20.0
Adults – NYC Mexicans	25.8	9.8	22.9	4.3	7.6
Adults – Madrid (Enríquez 1984)	34.0	16.0	14.0	14.0	14.0
Adults – Madrid (Cameron 1992)	31.0	25.0	^c 8.0	6.0	^d 8.0

Sources: Bilingual children over-eight (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997), Mexican newcomers in NYC (Otheguy-Zentella Corpus), Madrid (Enríquez 1984:350, reported in Cameron 1992:234, and Cameron 1992:233)

^{a,b}Bayley & Pease-Álvarez (1996, 1997) included *él*, *ella* and *usted* in their 3sg category.

^{c,d}Cameron (1992:233) included *él*, *ella*, *este*, *esta*, *aquel*, and *aquella* in his 3sg category, and *ellos*, *ellas*, *estos*, *estas*, *aquellos*, *aquellas* in his 3pl category.

A Chi-Square analysis of SPP expression by grammatical person was highly significant for the Mexico children [$\chi^2(4) = 49.3, p < .0001$], as well as for the Mexican adults in NYC [$\chi^2(4) = 128.63, p < .0001$], indicating that children are similar to adults insofar as their SPP expression differs significantly depending on the person and number of the SPP. Table 2 shows that the grammatical person that had the highest rate of SPP expression for all speakers was 1sg *yo*, indicating another similarity between the Mexico children and the other speaker groups.¹³ Table 2 also reveals differences between the Mexico children and the other speakers. First, the Mexico children's rate of overt SPP use for each grammatical person was lower than the rates reported for other speakers, with the exception of 1pl (*nosotros*), which the Mexico children expressed at a slightly higher rate than the Mexican adults in NYC. Second, the adult rates in Table 2 show that singulars tend to be expressed overtly more often than plurals, as has been commonly reported in previous studies (e.g. Cameron 1992; Flores-Ferrán 2002; Otheguy et al. 2007, 2010; Otheguy & Zentella 2012). The Mexico children, however, expressed singulars and plurals at similar rates for second and third person. Finally, the low rate of overt 3sg *él/ella* (3.1 percent) is particularly striking, since it is much lower than the rates reported for adults.¹⁴

2.3.3. Mexico children's rates of overt SPP expression by speech context

The Mexico children's rates of overt SPP use in three different conditions of data elicitation (narrating a picture book, telling a made-up story or a story from memory, responding to questions in a sociolinguistic interview) are reported in Table 3.

¹³ The finding here that adult newcomer Mexicans in the Otheguy-Zentella corpus express overt *yo* at higher rates than the other pronouns appears to diverge from findings previously reported for the same corpus. When considering all Mainlanders (a group that comprises Colombians and Ecuadorians in addition to Mexicans), Otheguy et al. (2010:35) found that the person/number form where pronouns were expressed at the highest rate was 3sg, not 1sg. This apparent discrepancy is partially due to a difference in how the 3sg person/number category is defined. In Otheguy et al. the 3sg category was based on the person/number ending of the verb, whereas in the current study it was based on the person/number of the pronoun. In other words, Otheguy et al.'s 3sg includes not only *él/ella*, but also *usted* and *uno*, whereas in the current study 3sg only includes *él/ella*. When the 3sg category for Mexican newcomers includes *usted* and *uno*, rates for 1sg and 3sg are almost identical: 25.8 percent and 25.6 percent, respectively.

¹⁴ The studies of adult SPP use reported in Table 2 show that adult rates for 3sg *él/ella* tend to be closer to 15 – 25 percent. The lower rate of 8 percent overt SPPs produced by adults in Madrid in Cameron (1992:233) might be attributable to different criteria for excluding and including verbs in the study (See Cameron 1992:234).

Table 3. Mexico children's rates of overt SPP expression by speech context

	N Verbs	Percent overt SPPs
Picture book	453	3.3
Story from memory	295	3.9
Sociolinguistic interview	346	11.5

A Chi-square analysis of SPP rates in the three conditions was significant [$\chi^2 (2) = 28.29, p < .0001$]. The means show that the significant speech context effect is primarily due to the higher rate of SPPs in interviews than in picture book narrations and stories told from memory. A further analysis was conducted without the interview contexts, and showed no significant difference between narrating a picture book and telling stories from memory [$\chi^2 (1) = .19, p = .66$ (ns)]. As it turns out, however, the significant difference between interview and other speech contexts was an artifact of the children's use of 1sg pronouns in the former, but not the latter. Narrating a picture book and telling stories from memory prompted the use of the third person much more so than the interview questions did, whereas 1sg contexts were almost exclusively restricted to the interviews (out of 202 1sg contexts, 85 percent were produced during the interviews). Since rates of SPP expression were highest for 1sg, and 1sg contexts mostly occurred during interviews, the rates of SPP expression were also highest in interviews. To further investigate possible speech context effects, the same analysis was done using only third person contexts. The results are reported in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Mexico children's rates of overt third person SPP expression by speech context

	N Verbs	Percent Overt SPPs
Picture book	387	3
Made-up story	259	4
Sociolinguistic interview	134	6

A Chi-square analysis of third person SPP use in the three conditions revealed no significant difference [$\chi^2 (2) = 3.64, p = .16$ (ns)], indicating that children expressed third person SPPs at similar rates in narratives of stories and interviews. Thus, regardless of speech context, the children used very few overt third person SPPs. Given that adults use very few overt 3pl SPPs too (see Table 2 above), the children's low rate of overt third person SPPs is most notable for 3sg referents.

2.3.4. Mexico children's rates of SPP expression by age

As mentioned above, the ages of the children included in this study ranged from 6;4 – 7;8 (mean age = 6;9). To determine whether or not there was an increase in overt SPP use between ages 6;4 and 7;8, a Pearson correlation was performed for age (expressed in months) and rate of SPP use. The correlation between age and SPP use was nonsignificant [$r (n=13) = -.44, p = .14$], indicating that there was no clear developmental progression in SPP use in the current data set.

2.3.5. Mexico children's and NYC Mexican adults' rates of SPP expression by speaker gender

Speaker gender was explored to determine if being male or female had an effect on SPP expression. Results for the Mexico children and the NYC Mexican adults are reported in Table 5.

Table 5. Mexico children's and NYC Mexican adults' rates of overt SPP expression by speaker gender

	N Verbs	Percent overt SPPs
Boys – Mexico	475	5.7
Girls – Mexico	675	6.7
Men – NYC Mexicans	2,030	18.8
Women – NYC Mexicans	441	18.2

The means in Table 5 show that Mexican girls expressed slightly higher rates of overt SPPs than boys, but this difference was not significant [$X^2(1) = .46, p = .5$ (ns)]. There was also no significant difference between the male and female Mexican adults in New York City [$X^2(1) = .11, p = .74$ (ns)].¹⁵

2.3.6. Summary of results

The Mexico children in this study expressed overt SPPs at much lower rates than adults and older (bilingual) children in California. The most dramatic finding was that the Mexico children produced particularly low rates of overt 3sg (*él/ella*) SPPs. Still, these children showed some evidence of adult patterning for SPP use in that all groups of speakers reported expressed 1sg (*yo*) at a higher rate than any other grammatical person (see Table 2). Exploration of speech context in the children's data did not indicate a clear effect of telling a story (with or without a picture book) as compared to responding to sociolinguistic interview questions when third person contexts were isolated. Instead, the children used very few overt 3sg and 3pl SPPs, regardless of speech context. Finally, no significant differences between boys and girls were found.

3. Discussion

This study reveals some striking differences in the variable use of Spanish SPPs in the narratives of Mexican monolingual Spanish-speaking children under the age of eight, as compared to Spanish-speaking bilingual children over the age of eight and Spanish-speaking adults. First and foremost, it appears that monolingual children in Mexico use overt SPPs at much lower rates than what has been reported for older speaker groups. At this point we cannot determine with any certainty when monolingual children begin to use more overt pronouns. There is some evidence that usage might increase after age eight, since the rates reported for eight- to twelve-year-old bilingual children in California (Bayley & Pease-Álvarez 1996, 1997) were higher than the rates reported here for the children in Mexico. But since increased knowledge of English correlates with higher rates of pronoun use (Otheguy et al. 2007, Otheguy & Zentella 2012),¹⁶ the differences between the under-eight monolingual children and the over-eight bilingual children could either reflect a developmental pattern among Spanish speaking children or a difference between monolingual and bilingual children. Investigations of older monolingual Spanish speaking children's SPP use would shed light on this issue. In addition, more research is needed to investigate different varieties of Spanish, since the Dominican children studied by Ortiz López (2011) produced higher rates of overt pronouns, as compared to the rates reported for the Mexico children in the current study.

The scarcity of overt SPPs in the Mexico children's speech makes it difficult to explore whether or not their use of overt and null SPPs is constrained by the same variables that constrain adult usage. In this paper one grammatical variable was studied, i.e. grammatical person/number of the pronoun, and results pointed to both similarities and differences between the Mexico children and older speakers. One similarity was that all speaker groups expressed 1sg SPPs (*yo*) at a higher rate than any other pronoun. In this respect we see that some aspects of the typical adult patterning emerge early.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the Mexico children produced lower rates of overt SPPs than the other speakers did for almost all grammatical person/number categories.

¹⁵ As mentioned above in footnote 3, Otheguy & Zentella (2012) found a significant influence of speaker gender on SPP use among Mainlanders in NYC. The results reported in Table 5 indicate that, to better understand the influence of speaker gender on SPP use, more analyses of the Otheguy-Zentella corpus are needed, and country of origin should be taken into consideration.

¹⁶ The debate over the influence of English on Spanish SPP use (e.g. Flores-Ferrán 2004, Silva-Corvalán 1994) is beyond the scope of the current paper.

¹⁷ Recall that all speakers express overt 1sg (*yo*) at higher rates than overt 3sg pronouns when the 3sg category only includes *él/ella*. This difference disappears for Mexican adults in NYC when the 3sg category includes *usted* and *uno*. See footnote 13 above for more details.

The Mexico children's rates for overt third person SPPs (3.1 percent for *él/ella* and 6.1 percent for *ellos/ellas*) suggest that children in this age range tend to alternate between lexical NPs and null SPPs for third person referents, thereby avoiding overt third person SPPs. For 3pl referents, this finding is not particularly noteworthy, since speakers of all ages tend not to express 3pl SPPs overtly (see Table 2). But for 3sg referents, the results are quite striking, and they indicate that overt *él/ella* are underproduced by the children.¹⁸ The avoidance of overt *él/ella* might be due to an underdeveloped grasp on the discourse-pragmatic conditions that govern the use of 3sg SPPs. Such an interpretation is supported by experimental studies that have shown that, compared to adults, children under eight are less sensitive to the influence of some discourse factors on SPP use, such as switch-reference (Shin & Cairns 2009, 2012; Sorace et al. 2009). One question that arises is what type of subject is used instead of overt *él/ella*. Do children omit overt *él/ella*, leaving null SPPs in their place, or do children replace overt *él/ella* with lexical NPs? Documentation of ambiguous null third person SPPs in Spanish-speaking school-age children's narratives (Barriga Villanueva 2002) and preferences for null SPPs in contexts where adults prefer overt SPPs (Shin & Cairns 2009, 2012) suggests that children tend to omit SPPs rather than overuse lexical NPs. Nonetheless, all types of subjects with third person referents need to be included in future studies to thoroughly answer this question. Some research comparing adult native and nonnative Spanish speakers have taken this approach (Blackwell & Quesada 2010, Geeslin & Gudmestad 2008, Quesada & Blackwell 2009), and native speaker patterns from these studies could serve as points of comparison.

The results in this study for speech contexts were somewhat surprising. One might expect that narrating a picture book would result in the greatest amount of third person SPP omission because the presence of the referents in the extralinguistic context could render SPP omission more felicitous for the children (Allen 2000, 2007; Clancy 1997; Paradis & Navarro 2003; Serratrice 2005). But the children produced very few overt third person SPPs in all three data elicitation contexts. It is possible that the no-shared knowledge context in which the picture books were narrated made this speech context more similar to the others. It is also possible that significant differences between speech contexts effects would emerge once children begin producing more overt third person SPPs.

Finally, neither speaker age nor speaker gender had a significant impact on the Mexico children's SPP use. Nonetheless, the girls produced a slightly higher rate of overt SPPs than the boys (see Table 5), a trend that was found to be significant among the eight- to twelve-year-old California children in Bayley & Pease-Álvarez's study (1996, 1997), but not among adults (see Table 5, as well as studies mentioned above, such as Silva-Corvalán 2001:155). This pattern supports the idea that gender differences emerge and increase in strength during elementary school, peak in adolescence, and then dissipate during adulthood (Cameron 2010, 2011).

4. Conclusion

The under-eight-year-old monolingual children in Mexico in this study produced few overt SPPs, and this was especially noteworthy for 3sg contexts. The scarcity of overt *él/ella* suggests that children tend to alternate between overt lexical NPs and null SPPs to refer to 3sg referents. Still, further exploration of this same age group would be beneficial in order to confirm the findings in this study. It is also necessary to investigate whether different types of production data yield higher rates of overt SPPs among children. For example, future studies might examine spontaneous conversation, as well as written data, produced by children under age eight. In addition, other variables that have been shown to influence SPP use among older (bilingual) children and adults, such as verb tense, lexical content of the verb, and switch reference, also need to be explored for monolingual children's use of overt and null SPPs. Once more variables are explored, multivariate analyses need to be performed to more

¹⁸ Although the California children studied by Bayley & Pease-Álvarez (1996, 1997) were used as a point of reference, no direct comparison can be made between them and the under-eight monolingual Mexico children for 3sg contexts not only because the over-eights were bilingual, but also because Bayley & Pease-Álvarez (1996, 1997) included *usted* and *uno* in addition to *él/ella*. As noted above in footnote 13, it appears that *usted* and *uno* occur overtly at higher rates than *él/ella*.

precisely measure the influence of multiple independent variables on SPP use.¹⁹ In sum, this study provides a much-needed spotlight on the variable expression of SPPs in monolingual first language acquisition of Spanish, and it raises many questions for future research.

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¹⁹ Bivariate analyses can run the risk of giving misleading results if data are unevenly distributed. Consider the following example. Otheguy & Zentella (2012) found that SPPs are expressed significantly more often in main clauses than in coordinate clauses. A bivariate analysis would attribute the greater amount of SPP use to an important difference between these clause types. Nevertheless, these authors also found that 55 percent of the subjects in main clauses were also switch-reference contexts (another important predictor variable), while only 36 percent of subjects in coordinate clauses were in switch-reference contexts. In other words, some of the clause type effects revealed by a bivariate analysis could potentially be explained by a different independent variable, in this case switch-reference. A multivariate analysis controls for other independent variables included in a study (such as switch-reference) while measuring the relevant independent variable, in this case, clause type. For further discussion see Guy (1993: 237-238) and Otheguy & Zentella (2012: 130).

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